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# Water Emergency at Lane Community College Archives

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**O**n the morning of April 18, 2007, Lane Community College Archives, located in Eugene, experienced a water emergency. Nearly 300 boxes of records suffered varying degrees of water damage and it was nearly six months before recovery was finished and all boxes were back up on the shelves. In this article, I'll give a brief chronological account of the response and recovery activities, and a brief discussion of what I learned from this experience.

The LCC Archives contains about 4,000 cubic feet of institutional records and is located in the basement of the Center Building directly below the school cafeteria. The Archives was staffed at that time by one part-time archivist and a part-time grant-funded processing archivist.

Blocked drains in the cafeteria located on the floor above caused water to gush out of an overhead drain onto three tiers of shelved records. Water covered the floor of one of the storage rooms, running beneath adjacent rows of boxes and leaking under a wall into

the Archives work area and office. Approximately 280 boxes of college records were impacted to varying degrees—some boxes were just sprinkled on, other boxes were wet with damp records inside, others boxes and their records were completely soaked. All records were housed in records boxes and most of the records were paper documents—no photographs, audio recordings, or oversized materials were affected. The records were a combination of permanent archival collections and temporary accessions governed by records retention schedules.

LCC Facilities and Management staff were the first responders and worked to stop the leaking drain, vacuum up the water on the floor, and move the boxes from the shelves onto the floor in an adjacent storage room. Belfor, a flood and fire recovery service, was called in to assist with recovery efforts. A triage was set up to deal with the affected records. Fifty-one boxes of the wettest records were taken by Belfor to a commercial freezer storage facility. Fifty

Dehumidification chamber with boxes open for drying.



minimally wet boxes remained in the Archives and were dried out by the morning. 180 boxes of damp records, including approximately 75 wet boxes that had been immediately reboxed, were moved to another building on campus. Dehumidifiers and fans were set up in the Archives storage room.

The next day, April 19, a secure, fenced area was constructed in a large building on campus used to teach construction and carpentry, and staff from Belfor enclosed it with plastic sheeting to create a dehumidification chamber. Dehumidifiers and a large fan were placed inside to facilitate the drying out process.

We were uncertain about the source of the leaked water because water from three sources—a toilet, dishwasher, and ice machine—converged into one pipe which had somehow become blocked by a t-shirt. We were concerned that the wet boxes and records were contaminated with bacteria; and, in fact, testing showed that detectable levels of coliform and other bacteria were present. An industrial hygienist outlined a cleaning protocol. Because of the presence of bacteria, all clean-up work from that point forward was done by staff from Belfor who were specially trained and certified, wearing protective clothing and using respirators. Belfor staff removed wet carpet and drywall that had been contaminated by water seeping under the wall between the Archives work area and the storage room.

The first priority was to clean the Archives work area, office and storage room where the leak occurred. In order to properly clean the floor beneath adjacent rows of shelves, another 200–300 boxes of records had to be moved from their shelves. Records which had sustained water and mold damage were reboxed by staff from Belfor wearing protective clothing, and a total of 101 boxes were taken by Belfor to a treatment facility in Ft. Worth, Texas, for gamma radiation

treatment to destroy bacteria and mold. The remaining records were reboxed and returned to the Archives for reshelving. Ten boxes had met their retention requirements and were taken by Belfor for shredding.

On May 24–25 we reshelved all the boxes that had been displaced. Staff from LCC Facilities Management assisted in moving the boxes back to the shelves. Archival colleagues Tiah Edmunson-Morton and Larry Landis from the Oregon State University Archives and Terry Baxter from Multnomah County Archives volunteered to help with the reshelving effort. Boxes were sorted by accession number and eventually all accessions and collections were reunited and reshelved.

In August, the boxes sent by Belfor to Texas for gamma radiation treatment were returned to the Archives. No records were lost and all affected records were eventually returned to their shelves in September.

For photographs and a more detailed accounting of the recovery efforts, go to the LCC Archives Web page: <http://www.lanec.edu/archives/ARwater.htm>.

I learned a number of things from this experience.

- I had a **disaster response and recovery manual** and, although it was several years out-of-date, having gone through the process of writing it, as well as having attended various disaster workshops and seminars, gave me the basic tools needed for dealing with this crisis.
- The main problem, which I had not anticipated, had to do with the **contamination of the records with sewage water**. The presence of coliform and other bacteria made the recovery process much more costly and involved than if we were just dealing with wet records.



- The **type of shelving** used in storage areas proved to be very significant. About half our shelving units had particle board shelves that rested directly on the cement floor making recovery efforts much more time consuming and difficult. Other shelving units had relatively new metal shelves, with no boxes on the top shelf and with the bottom shelf three inches off the floor; this helped to protect the boxes and made cleanup easier.

There were several factors that made the response and recovery process successful. The quick, enthusiastic and thoughtful response and continuing assistance of many staff from the **LCC Facilities Management Department** (grounds keepers, painters, carpenters, plumbers, housekeepers, environmental officers, and especially the supervisors) was invaluable. They respected the need for security and proper handling of the records and, in fact, anticipated many of the needs of the Archives throughout the recovery period.

The **professional support and advice** of Normandy Helmer, Access and Preservation Officer for the University of Oregon Special Collections was very much appreciated. Connecting with colleagues in the archives and library professions concerning first response and recovery measures was important and invaluable. Randy Silverman, preservation librarian at the University of Utah, gave much needed advice concerning contaminated records.

We contracted with **Belfor Property Restoration**, a commercial flood and fire reconstruction and restoration company, and they performed many of the recovery tasks. They were an excellent resource for how to handle the wet and contaminated records. I was impressed with their professionalism in handling confidential, public records and in their prompt and efficient service.



Terry Baxter, archivist for Multnomah County, assists with reshelving.

The **support of my supervisor**, Nadine Williams, Director of the LCC Library, was critical. She provided important professional and personal support and was a vital link to institutional resources and to the college administration.

**Colleagues and friends** in the archival community were especially important. I am especially grateful to Tiah Edmunson-Morton and Larry Landis of the Oregon State University Archives and Terry Baxter from Multnomah County Records and Archives who were able to come and help with the recovery.

Having a network of professional, institutional, and commercial resources identified and ready to assist in response and recovery efforts along with personal support from friends and colleagues turned this disaster into a series of manageable tasks. 

